

**FWP Elk Summit
December 8, 2007**

“Perspective’s Panel” – Remarks by Chuck Rein, rancher and representative for the Montana Stockgrowers Association

COMMENTS TO ELK SUMMIT

My name is Chuck Rein. I am a rancher and hunting outfitter from Big Timber. My Grandfather settled on the land my wife and I now ranch 114 years ago. I bought the land from my Dad on a contract for deed 31 years ago. I have outfitted and guided elk hunters for 22 seasons. I am here today to represent the Montana Stockgrowers Association.

I vividly remember spotting a cow elk while hunting mule deer in the late 1960’s. My buddy and I immediately abandon our hunt to race home and tell our folks the exciting news. Now elk numbers in the same area are counted by hundreds. Elk numbers in central and western Montana have exploded in the last 40 years. That is the reason we are here today.

As it became apparent that the statewide elk population was growing at an alarming rate the finger pointing began. Here are a few examples.

FWP claimed they were powerless to manage the herd because private landowners limited access to hunters. Yet last year FWP limited hunter opportunity by closing all late season cow elk hunting. They justified this management decision by saying elk numbers continued to grow even with extended seasons and shortening the season would allow more elk to be harvested.

Sportsmen blamed outfitters for leasing prime elk habitat to serve their nonresident clients to the exclusion of the resident hunter. If blame can be justified at all then it should be directed to the landowner, for only the landowner can decide to whom and for what purpose he will lease his land. Many landowners have come to rely on the income from recreational leases to sustain their agricultural operations. If legislative attempts to cripple the outfitting industry are successful landowners will lease their land to other entities.

So is the finger of blame for excessive elk numbers justly leveled at the private landowner? Certainly to an extent. Elk do not survive and thrive without excellent habitat, especially winter habitat. Ranchers must keep our land stocked at a sustainable level. Leaving extra forage ungrazed insures a healthy root system and gives the plant a head start the next spring. This is especially important in these times of drought. Elk reap the benefit of our management practices and multiply faster because of them.

Do landowners limit access to their land by hunters? Some do. But there are good reasons to deny access. I’ll give you one quick example. My community was recently

devastated by the Chichi Fire. The second morning after the fire started a hunter knocked on my neighbors door before daylight seeking permission to hunt. This neighbor, who had just lost most of his winter range, all of his hay, and several outbuildings had fallen into bed exhausted the night before to get some much needed rest. He explained to the hunter that the fire had run all of the elk off his ranch and hunting would be pointless. The hunter left only to return sometime later, once again awakening the landowner, to seek permission to come back the next day. This kind of behavior is intolerable and unfortunately all too common. Oh by the way, the Chichi Fire which burned 18000 acres, 3 houses, 36 outbuildings, miles of fence, and hundreds of tons of hay, was started by a misguided resident hunter who failed to extinguish his warming fire.

These examples are both extreme and rare but yet given their significance are all too common. This kind of hunter behavior leaves the landowner to ponder if he should tolerate excessive elk numbers or risk potential problems with hunters.

Blaming one another has not and will not solve the elk numbers problem. If we don't check our egos at the door when we come to the table to solve this problem the only winners will be the wolves that feast on our burgeoning elk herd.

MSGA has had policy since 1995 that could be part of the solution. The concept is simple. Leave the season open until population numbers as defined in the elk management plan are met. Every rancher has a management plan for his cow herd. Every year as young animals are recruited into the herd a corresponding number of culls are removed. The number he chooses to run is based on historic carrying capacity and varies as moisture and range condition dictate.

Harvest based seasons will do nothing to force lands now closed to hunting to be opened to the public. MSGA will not support policy that in any way diminishes private property rights.

Elk are conditioned to move to a sanctuary with heavy cover or no hunting pressure at the sound of the first gunshot. If weather permits they will stay there until hunting pressure eases. In many cases today elk find security on lands owned by "non-traditional" landowners. A harvest based season could run until just prior to when the bulls drop their antlers, say the end of February. This type of season would allow elk to be killed when they wander off sanctuary lands closed to hunting onto land where hunters are welcome.

A harvest based season provides hunter opportunity and a viable solution to excessive elk populations. Landowners who suffer economic hardship because of large elk numbers would not be left helpless as elk migrate onto their land for winter forage.

MSGA will not endorse any program that erodes private property rights or further challenges ranchers financially. However MSGA is committed to working toward a solution to the elk numbers problem.